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AWASH IN DARK MONEY, A WESTERN THINK TANK IS LEADING THE CHARGE AGAINST THE ANTIQUITIES ACT

With more than \$1.6 million from groups backed by shadowy billionaires, the Sutherland Institute, based in Utah, has set its sights on the Bears Ears National Monument.

JIMMY TOBIAS · MAY 11, 2017

President Donald Trump recently sat down at a tiny desk inside the Department of the Interior and, with customary bluster, signed an executive order targeting the Antiquities Act, a 110-year-old law that empowers presidents to designate national monuments on federal land. Among other things, the order directs Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke to review most of the national monuments that have been created or expanded since 1996, including Utah's newly minted Bears Ears National Monument. It is the first step in an unprecedented effort to shrink or eliminate numerous monuments and thereby weaken America's conservation system.

"Today we're putting the states back in charge, it's a big thing," Trump declared in front of an audience that included Governor Gary Herbert and Senators Mike Lee and Orrin Hatch of Utah, who he credited with spurring him to take action. "The Antiquities Act does not give the federal government unlimited power to lock up millions of acres of land and water," he added later, "and it's time we ended this abusive practice."

As anyone familiar with Western politics knows, Trump's executive order is the culmination of a concerted right-wing campaign to turn our country's conservation laws, and particularly the Antiquities Act, into objects of toxic controversy. No group has been more committed to this effort—no group more zealous in its opposition to conservation—than the political leaders of Utah and their allies, including a little-known but influential Salt Lake City think tank called the Sutherland Institute.

Indeed, shortly after Trump's announcement, in a fancy glass-paneled office, a Sutherland Institute staffer named Matt Anderson stood in front of a camera and celebrated.

"As the dust settles from President Trump's executive order calling for review of national monuments, Western rural communities wake up to a brighter and more hopeful future," Anderson said. "Every four years Western states wait on pins and needles wondering how a new president will abuse the Antiquities Act to lock up millions of acres in national monuments, blocking access, deteriorating local economies, and devastating rural communities."

Sutherland blasted the video over its Facebook and Twitter feeds, just the latest addition to an impressive portfolio of anti-Antiquities Act content it has produced in recent years. Above all else, the group aims to eliminate the Bears Ears National Monument, a 1.35 million acre sprawl of ancient buttes, deep canyons, and sacred Native American sites, which President Barack Obama, using the legitimate authority granted to him under the law, designated in southern Utah toward the end of his term.

To achieve its purposes, Sutherland and affiliates have set up a website calling on the federal government to rescind the new national monument. They have produced anti-monument video advertisements. They have organized a petition drive. They have testified before the Utah legislature. They have traveled to Capitol Hill. They have churned out op-ed after op-ed in the *Salt Lake Tribune* and other Utah papers. They have, in short, helped create a narrative meant to make people despise national monuments and their labor has paid off.

The Sutherland Institute says these efforts are about lifting up local citizens, whose voices have been smothered by outside influences.

But what other interests does Sutherland serve?

I wanted to find out, so I took a look at a few tax forms. When trying to understand any advocacy organization's motivations, methods, and objectives, it's useful to know who helps pay the bills. This is what I found: The Sutherland Institute—bold champion of local voices, opponent of outside influences—is generously funded by dark money groups tied to right-wing billionaires and out-of-state industrialists.

Between 2010 and 2015, according to the latest Internal Revenue Service filings, Sutherland received no less than \$1.6 million from three leading right-wing dark money groups. Donors Trust, Inc. gave at least \$830,000. The Donors Capital Fund gave \$565,000. And the State Policy Network gave \$231,100.

These three organizations are infamous. Donors Trust, Inc. and Donors Capital Fund, both based in Virginia, have been described as "the dark-money ATM of the conservative movement." They allow wealthy donors to pour money into political causes without revealing their identities. The State Policy Network, meanwhile, is a national organization that funds smaller right-wing groups in states across the country.

According to investigative journalist Jane Mayer, in her book *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right*, Donors Trust, Donors Capital Fund, and the State Policy Network are closely aligned with powerful billionaires like Charles and David Koch, the DeVos Family, and their political allies in the fossil fuel and finance industries. Together they regularly funnel millions of dollars to far-right organizations like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, Americans for Prosperity, and the American Legislative Exchange Council, as well as thousands of dollars more to state-based think tanks like the Property and Environment Research Center.

For Sutherland, dark money often constitutes a significant chunk of its budget. In fiscal year 2010, for instance, Sutherland took in approximately \$1.3 million in total revenue. During the 2010 calendar year, meanwhile, Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund, funneled \$596,000 to the organization, a quantity equal to more than one-third of its 2010 income. In other years, like 2013, dark money made up approximately 10 percent of the group's revenue. The unaccountable cash flowing into Sutherland's coffers is regularly earmarked for general operations as well as journalism programs and federalism projects, among other purposes.

Sutherland, responding to questions about its finances, wrote the following in an email:

Sutherland Institute has not received any out-of-state funds for research or communications related to the Bears Ears issue. The Institute does not do contract work for private or government entities. All donors understand that Sutherland staff determines which policy initiatives it will pursue and research, including the public positions it will take. In addition, the vast majority of Sutherland funding comes from Utah foundations and residents.

When asked, the group would not provide data on its funding sources for 2016 and 2017.

It shouldn't surprise you that dark money beneficiaries like Sutherland are working to devastate the Antiquities Act and rollback national monuments. Conservation and concentrated wealth have always clashed. The public trust has always had to contend with the power of special interests.

Theodore Roosevelt, a founding father of American conservation, the guy who signed the Antiquities Act into law, recognized this state of affairs from the start. In 1910, in his New Nationalism speech, Roosevelt made a [direct link](#) between the need to conserve natural resources and the need to constrain special interests. He decried the sad fact that "great special business interests too often control and corrupt the men and methods of government for their own profit." He declared his belief that "natural resources must be used for the benefit of all our people, and not monopolized for the benefit of the few...." And then he said this:

Now, with the water power, with the forests, with the mines, we are brought face to face with the fact that there are many people who will go with us in conserving the resources only if they are to be allowed to exploit them for their benefit. That is one of the fundamental reasons why the special interests should be driven out of politics.

Conservation, in others, can't truly be successful while concentrated commercial power continues to corrupt our political life. It was true then, and it is true now.

Special interests—billionaire plutocrats whose dark money flows into think tanks, advocacy groups, and campaign coffers—are working to unravel the progressive conservation paradigm. They are working to eliminate federal protections for land, water, and wildlife. As long as their money pollutes our politics, the Antiquities Act and other laws like it will perpetually be in peril.